

Our Core Truth
January 10, 2016
Mark 1:9-11
1 John 4:7-12

This morning's scene, only a few lines long, is an earthy one. Like Jesus' birth in a stable that we celebrate at Christmas, today we again find Jesus in the midst of the elements. Like he is birthed by Mary, he is baptized by someone else, by John. There is humility in it—like you and like me, Jesus is depending on other people, is immersed in the messy details of life and the world. He is baptized amidst those messy details, baptized in the dirty water of a river. He feels that water on his skin, feels the coolness of the air against it afterward. Baptism is earthy. It is intimate. It is humble.

Today the church—not only our church but many others around the world—today the church celebrates Jesus' baptism ... and our own. Remember Your Baptism Sunday is not simply about remembering the physical details, what the space looked like, who was present, what it felt like. Some of us can remember those details; many of us can't. But Remember Your Baptism Sunday *is* about remembering what baptism is for, what it means that we are baptized, what it tells us about ourselves, whether we chose to be baptized or our parents or whoever else chose for us.

Jesus' immersion in the waters of the Jordan parallels his immersion in the messiness of earthly life. God is immersed in life in all its little details. Our baptism about that too. A number of the prayers the church uses in baptism include the phrase "baptized into his death and resurrection." We are baptized with Jesus. We are baptized into his suffering as well as his joy. We are baptized into his losses as well as his wins.

In fact immediately after Jesus is baptized, he is sent out into the wilderness where he suffers temptation, hunger, loneliness, meanness. As followers, we might know something about that, about temptation, about hunger, about loneliness, about meanness, about things not being the way they should be.

A popular movie a few years back, *Silver Linings Playbook*, features a man named Pat who had been hospitalized after some violent outbursts related to his bipolar disorder. When he's released, he moves back in with his parents and does everything he can to try to win back his estranged wife Nikki. All that he does it motivated by wanting to be loved by her again.

There are things I do too out of wanting to be loved, whether I'm aware of it right away or not, ways I try to be different because I think it will make me more worthy of love. I'm guessing that each of us does this—that it's part of being human. Our temptations so often are linked to that desire to be loved, linked to the ways that we try to meet that fundamental need in a world that often isn't nice, that often isn't caring.

The story of Jesus' baptism and subsequent wilderness experience tell us that Jesus knew something about this need in the midst of a messy and mean world. In the

wilderness, the devil challenges Jesus' power and questions God's love and provision for him. Jesus knows the temptation. We are baptized with Jesus, and these stories remind us that our path of following him may not be easy.

Yet it's important that this wilderness experience comes after this morning's passage and not before it. Jesus' baptism experience comes first. When he steps out of the river, a voice from heaven booms down, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

That's the key thing: We are not only baptized into his suffering, death, and resurrection — not only baptized into what Jesus experiences on the outside—but also baptized into his core truth, into the fact that is the ground of his existence, the thing that enables him to live and heal and endure the way that he does. He steps out of the river and a voice from heaven booms down, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

This claim on his identity, the knowledge of being loved, allows him to do hard things, things that are hard to do without that knowledge. He does hard things like:

loving his enemy

being different than the crowd

extending grace to people who disagree with him

seeing things from another person's perspective

loving those who are hard to love

welcoming people who are strange or struggling in some way, perhaps people like Pat from Silver Linings Playbook.

Jesus' belovedness is the ground he stands on that lets him do these hard things. As baptized Christians, that claim is our claim as well. Baptism is a reminder of our belovedness, of God's love for us that isn't about what we do or say but that comes purely because we are, because we exist, because God has made us and given us breath.

Henri Nouwen puts it beautifully, as you can see on the front of your bulletin today. He writes, "Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence." It's a statement that comes at the end of a longer paragraph about Nouwen's take on the scenes of Jesus' temptation and wilderness experience and God's voice coming down from heaven. Nouwen says:

"Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity, and power can indeed present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, "Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody." ... [My dark side says,] I am no good... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected,

and abandoned. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved." Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence."

This tension between rejection, especially self-rejection, and belovedness goes on all around us. In *Silver Linings Playbook*, Pat is willing to do anything to get his estranged wife Nikki's love again. During the time he is focusing on that, thinking he'll be somebody if only he gets her back, he meets Tiffany, who is struggling with depression herself. Tiffany loves dancing, and she convinces him that Nikki will be pleased with him if he takes up dance and works hard to prove to her how he has changed. Nikki will be pleased *if*... So Pat takes up Tiffany on those dance lessons. As she teaches him, it is clear that she cares for him. And eventually Pat realizes that he doesn't need to be different for Tiffany, that it's not that she'll love him *if*. She already does.

Now this is a romantic example, not a necessarily spiritual one, but it is true in our spiritual lives as well. When we realize we are already loved, we can stop trying so hard to be different, stop trying so hard to prove to ourselves and other people that we are worthy of love. It's no excuse for ignoring our responsibility for our actions, but it is an invitation to see what we do and say as separate from who we really are deep down. Realizing we are already loved is an invitation to step out of the river, grounded in God's words, "You are my child, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." It is where we can start to move forward.

To those of us plagued by guilt, baptism says: You are not your past actions; you are the beloved child of God.

To people who are lonely, baptism says: You are not the number of relationships you have; you are the beloved child of God.

To people who are rich, baptism says: You are not just valuable for your earnings or accomplishments; you are the beloved child of God.

To people who are unemployed or disabled, baptism says: Your productivity is not the defining thing about you; you are the beloved child of God.

To students, baptism says: You are not loved for your grades or athleticism or popularity; you are a beloved child of God.

To anyone who is sick in body, mind, or spirit, baptism says: You are not what happens to you, you are not only your struggles, you are not a burden; you are the beloved child of God.

Yes, being the Beloved constitutes the the core truth of our existence. This identity moves us out of the river. It moves us forward on the path. It moves us into mission. We are baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, baptized into following Jesus, who does

hard things... being different from the culture, extending grace to people who disagree, welcoming people who are weird or hurting, loving people who are hard to love.

In doing these things, we proclaim with our lives that being the beloved is our core truth. We proclaim it for ourselves and for other people. We heard from John's letter this morning, "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."

Our baptism moves us forward on the path, moves us into mission. And our mission is to love one another, so people who need love find it and a beloved community is made real. God's love becomes manifest.

Affirming our own belovedness is the first step. Mission starts inside. And we need reminders of this belovedness every day, because we live in a climate and time when we get messages from media and social media and advertising and politics that can lead us to question it every day. All of these things can wear down our sense that we are beloved. So we need reminders of it. We need reminders if we are going to be able to love one another, to see God's love manifest among us.

So in a bit when you hear me say, "Remember your baptism and be thankful," remember that baptism is about belovedness. Baptism is a way we are claimed and marked by God. Baptism is about God calling to each of us, "You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased."

Jesus' ministry starts there.
Our ministry starts there.

Amen.